

INFLUENCES AFFECTING STUDENT DISCONTINUATIONS

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Each year numbers of university students discontinue their courses. The number involved varies from university to university and from faculty (or school) to faculty. The proportion of students discontinuing can be over ten per cent in some departments while it is usually true that the rate of discontinuation is higher amongst first year than among later year students, and higher among students in non-professional courses such as Arts, Science and Economics than among those in professional courses.

Little information has been gathered on the nature of discontinuers and the reasons for their discontinuations. From time to time statements are made by various persons, ranging from prominent university staff to leading public figures, about 'wastage' which occurs as a result of so many students 'dropping out'. Since the gaining of a place in a university course of one's choice has become more competitive and many applicants are unsuccessful with their applications, there has been increasing pressure on those who are admitted not to 'waste' their opportunities. This pressure has made a decision to discontinue more difficult to make for the student and less acceptable to the community.

The term 'drop out' is often used to describe students who do not proceed with their courses. This term is somewhat loosely used and unfortunately often is used in a derogatory sense. There are really three groups of persons who 'drop out'. First those who either decide not to continue or are prevented from continuing their courses because of academic failure, second, those successful students who choose not to re-enrol in their courses, and third, those students who voluntarily withdraw from their courses during the academic year. Most of the studies relating to 'drop outs' include all three groups since interest has largely been focused on graduation rates, and those who do not proceed with their studies are therefore all lumped together. Summerskill¹,² in his survey of the United States scene has taken this approach as has Miller³ in his review of higher education in Australia, England and the U.S.A.

The interest in this study, however, is solely in the third group — those who withdraw during the academic year. The information relating to this specific group is scarce indeed but recently three studies in Australia have focused on this group. Lawrence⁴ studied first year students at Monash

University who discontinued between 14-4-72 and 1-9-72. Fifty-five student responses were analysed and Lawrence demonstrated that the discontinuers did not constitute a homogenous group. He did not, however, compare them with continuing students.

At Adelaide University, Rump and Greet⁵ conducted a survey of all students who voluntarily withdrew before 31st July. Their aim was to have these students complete a questionnaire and also to complete a number of psychological and educational tests. However, their response rate was only about one-third and interpretation of their results is accordingly open to question. The chief findings from this study were that part-time students had particular difficulties and discontinued at a rate higher than full-time students, and that first year and later year students differed in the reasons for their discontinuations. Both these findings are recorded in this present study.

Susan Hayes⁶ conducted a study of 170 students who voluntarily withdrew from their courses at the University of New South Wales. Hayes identified five groups of discontinuers (she used the term 'drop out' which we have chosen not to use).

In addition to examining the nature of the 'drop outs', Hayes compared them with a matched sample of continuing students she labelled 'persisters' and established numbers of differences between the groups.

There is no reason to believe that factors leading to discontinuation is one institution necessarily apply to another. There may be factors peculiar to an institution itself which significantly affect students' decisions and these factors need to be discovered. Apart from any generalities which may be established from research relating to discontinuation the topic should be a subject of internal institutional research since it is each institution's responsibility to seek information relating to its own students. This article reports the major findings of a study which set out to do this for the University of Sydney.

Procedure

It was decided to conduct a questionnaire survey of all students who discontinued their courses at the University of Sydney in 1973. A questionnaire was constructed for the purpose. The questionnaire included items relating to respondents' domicile, family members' university attendance, travelling time, reasons for discontinuing and the conditions leading up to the decision to discontinue. In addition a series of ratings about their university experience was included. These ratings as well as some of the

questions had been used in an earlier study involving students in Geography⁷. The responses of the Geography students were available as a reference group with which the responses of the discontinuers could be compared.

Questionnaires were sent to all persons who discontinued their enrolments. The distribution of the questionnaires was undertaken by the staff of the Information and Enrolments Office as soon as notification of discontinuation was received. Names and addresses of those receiving the questionnaires were forwarded to the Student Counselling Service so that non-respondents could be followed up. Two follow-up letters were prepared and these were despatched by the Student Counselling Service four weeks and seven weeks after the initial request if no reply had been received. Another copy of the questionnaire was included in the second follow-up letter. This procedure was also adopted in 1974. The response rate was 71.3% in 1973 and 67.1% in 1974.

The first few weeks of the academic year are often quite confusing to students. Many students change their minds about their choice of subjects and amend their enrolments to suit their intentions. Others decide that they do not wish to stay at university at all, and such decisions are reached for a variety of reasons. Persons in this category cancel their enrolments altogether. For example, in 1975 in the Faculty of Engineering, fifty-five students discontinued during first year, but twenty-nine of these did so during the first week. Such persons are unlikely to be committed to a course and their experience of university is minimal. For the purpose of this survey it was decided to contact only those students who discontinued after the third week of first term. By this means it was felt that all respondents would have sufficient contact with the university to form some judgements about it and to experience consistent reactions. Moreover, each would have demonstrated a modicum of commitment to his/her chosen course.

Initially the intention was to carry out the survey for 1973 only. However, at the end of 1973 the Australian Government abolished university fees and it was decided to continue the survey through 1974 in order to see if the abolition of fees made any difference to discontinuation rates or to reasons for discontinuing.

Results

A summary only of the major findings is presented here. A fuller report of the study⁸ has been prepared and distributed internally within the University of Sydney. Copies of this report, which includes the questionnaire used in the study, are available on request from the authors.

Four groups of discontinuers were identified on the basis of the reasons for their discontinuations. Of the 858 respondents 7.1% indicated **financial** problems as the main reason for discontinuing, 9.2% stated

illness, 30.8% stated they were **not coping**, and 17.9% said they had **changed their life goals**. A further group of 27.6% indicated varied **other** reasons, while 7.4% indicated more than one of the above. The distribution of respondents across groups was almost identical for the two years 1973 and 1974 and, therefore, responses for the two years have been combined. Among the reasons offered by the 'other' group for their discontinuation were pregnancy, demands of employment, lack of evening courses, inadequate child care facilities, and varied dissatisfactions with courses.

In considering the results of this survey emphasis has been placed on the four identifiable groups, financial, illness, not coping and changed life goals. Analysis of data took two forms. First, these four groups of discontinuers were compared on numbers of variables to determine if there were differences between them and secondly, they were compared with the reference group of Geography students who represented a group of successful and continuing students. In the latter case, since the Geography students were all first year students and since they were drawn only from degree courses in Arts, Science, Economics and Education, the discontinuing students used for comparison were restricted to first year students from these four courses. Thus for the first part of the study all 858 respondents were included; for the second part only 187 were involved.

What are the Characteristics of Discontinuers?

The results of the survey clearly demonstrate that discontinuers are not a homogenous group. Their experiences of university are different, their reasons for discontinuation are different as are their intentions following discontinuation. In fact, when divided into groups according to reason for discontinuation far more differences on other variables were established than was the case when respondents were divided according to sex or to year status.

On examining the nature of the reasons students gave for their discontinuations, and the kinds of questions on which they differed, it seemed that discontinuers could be divided into two broad groups — those who discontinued for reasons largely outside their own control and those who discontinued for reasons inherent in the persons themselves. It was also noted that an age factor was associated with this grouping — those who discontinued for reasons beyond their control being older than the others.

Persons who discontinued for reasons largely outside their control were chiefly those who discontinued through illness or for financial reasons. Responses of these two groups to the various items were seldom significantly different from each other but frequently were significantly different from the other groups though not greatly dissimilar from a

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reference group of continuing students. Both groups appeared highly motivated academically, felt that they were coping with their studies, were involved in their studies and seemed to be clear about their objectives. A very high proportion of both groups indicated that they were very happy at university and had firm intentions to return. It is obviously disappointing for both groups of students that their studies had to be interrupted. However, since the reasons for interrupting studies seem to have been beyond their control it may fairly be said that there is little anyone could have done about it. That may well be true in the case of those discontinuing through illness, but it is not necessarily true for those who had financial difficulties.

This group is most interesting and is worthy of close attention. In the first place it is worth noting that the proportion of discontinuers giving financial difficulty as the reason for discontinuation was no different in 1974, when fees were abolished, than in 1973, the last year in which students paid fees. Counsellors have mostly taken the view that living costs provide greater difficulties for students than fees, and this view seems to be supported by the 1973-74 discontinuation figures. Financial assistance over and above relief from fee payment would be needed to help this group of students remain at university and the evidence produced from this survey suggests that such assistance might be a good investment. Such a highly motivated group with clear goals could be expected to have a high graduation rate (not one person in this group felt that the level of difficulty of his/her courses was more than he/she could cope with).

The two groups of students who discontinued for intrapersonal reasons were the **not coping** group and those whose **life goals** had changed. Both groups were younger than the two already discussed. Although these two groups were distinctly different from the other two groups, this does not mean that they were similar to each other. Whereas one group was clearly not coping in several respects, the other group whose life goals had changed, were basically capable of coping but were disappointed with their university experience. They were unable to commit themselves to their studies because of uncertainties about their goals or about why they were at the University. In some cases the University did not measure up to their expectations. However, as a group they did not feel socially cut off or feel threatened by their surroundings. The decision to discontinue in their case seems to be a healthy adjustment to their predicament and a positive step towards a new direction. Since just over half this group did not intend to return to university their new directions obviously lay elsewhere; for the remainder they probably lay in different courses within the University.

The not coping group stood out from the others in the degree of personal discomfort, unhappiness and

social isolation they experienced. They were the largest group, amounting to almost one-third of respondents. Emotional factors seemed to contribute much more to their inability to cope than did intellectual inadequacies, and it appears that many of them are the persons about whom much has been written — those who do not make the transition from school to university. We cannot ignore the finding that one-third of persons who discontinued in the year following their matriculation did so because they were not coping. Such persons may well have benefited from delaying their entry to university until they had acquired greater maturity and life experience. This is not to suggest that all students should take this step; the problem is one of identifying those at risk and, therefore, likely to benefit from a deferred entry.

What are the Universities' Responsibilities?

In our view the first responsibility of the universities is to investigate the characteristics of discontinuers. Each university should seek to understand the discontinuation situation on its campus. Discontinuers should be asked their reason for discontinuation and any suggestions they might have as to how the university might have facilitated their continuance. Research should be initiated which might lead to early identification of discontinuers.

Any such research effort is well justified. Our results showed that discontinuers at Sydney University were not by any means a homogenous mass of 'drop outs' — students who were not coping and ones who had somehow not measured up to the tasks they undertook. We find strong evidence to suggest that many discontinuers could have either been helped to continue in the year from which they discontinued or to have had their re-entrance to university fostered. Two such groups of students are discussed beneath.

Students who discontinued for financial (and illness) reasons tended to be of mature age (a mean age of 23), possibly married and with high motivation — sometimes higher than our comparison group of continuing students. Such a potentially rewarding group of students could have been helped if there was wide knowledge amongst academic and administrative staffs of financial assistance schemes available. Many universities have financial aid offices and each university should make sure such offices are well known. Furthermore, persons who advise or counsel older students at the time of their entry to university could be of considerable help if they both emphasised the need to ensure financial security before beginning a course and pointed out the existence of financial aid schemes to assist them in emergencies.

The group usually identified as 'no-hopers', those students who were not coping, were shown by our study to feel remote from their lecturers, to dislike attending lectures and to feel uncomfortable within

them. They were least likely to speak to the persons next to them in lectures or tutorials or to like being a university student. Such characteristics could be identified and help tendered by perceptive teaching staff or by referral to the counselling or health services. It is even possible that students with these characteristics could be identified early by mass questionnaire testing and helped to overcome difficulties before they became overwhelming.

Students also seem to take the view that the universities have responsibilities with regard to their discontinuation. 30% of our respondents felt the university could have facilitated their continuation, usually through a change of policy. Discontinuing students felt the need for greater child care facilities, for more financial aid, for a different examination system, for fewer course hassles (some faculties seem more prone to problems) and for a greater effort at reducing the impersonality of the university — some students considered our questionnaire a step in this direction.

The outcome of our study showed that for a sizeable proportion of students the decision to discontinue was forced upon them by factors over which they had little control, or was arrived at as a healthy readjustment in decision making. However, it was also clear that a large number of respondents indicated that factors within the control of the University had led to their discontinuations. This situation is undoubtedly true for all universities. If the universities accept their responsibilities to try and identify the major factors within their own control which adversely affect student adjustment, then they must consequently face the challenge of deciding what steps they can take to meet the problems they identify.

Each university would need to take steps to meet its own particular situation. On the basis of the information derived from our survey, for example,

there appear to be a number of steps which could be taken in the University of Sydney. Some of these have already been mentioned (e.g. publicity to financial aids).

In view of the fact that 12% of respondents did not discuss with anybody their decisions to discontinue it would be useful to examine the way in which separation occurs and endeavour to devise a procedure which would ensure that all discontinuers discussed their plans with a suitable member of staff (e.g. sub-dean, counsellor, course adviser) before taking action.

By and large there are formal and informal steps which can be followed. Informal steps are at a more personal level and involve one concerned person interacting with another. At a more formal level, however, we should not shirk the attempt to identify as early as possible students at risk. Information derived from surveys such as we have reported can help make this possible, and if a body of students seen to be at risk can be so identified it would then be possible to institute suitable intervention strategies.

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